

New Directions in Russia's Foreign Policy: Implications for the Middle East

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Recent years have testified to substantive changes in Russia's foreign policy approach. Underlying these changes is Russia's at times troubled search for the best way to integrate in the international system and promote its ambitions. The result has been noticeable active Russian involvement in the international arena, including involvement in major issues such as relations with the United States; arms control; development of relations with the European Union and NATO; and the Middle East. For Russia, which only a few years ago found itself on the fringes of the major international processes, this is an attempt to change its standing and regain a central role in the international arena.

This article surveys the developments in Russian foreign policy and the practical implementation of this policy, while examining its ramifications for the Middle East.

Developments in Russian Foreign Policy

The Soviet Union implemented a superpower foreign policy and strove steadily to achieve a hegemonic status, or at least a status equal to the country's competitors in the bipolar international arena, where the US-led Western bloc was positioned against the Soviet Eastern bloc. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became its successor, but it failed to fill the vacuum that was left after the superpower's dissolution. In the first decade, Russia was pushed to the outskirts of international processes, and it was forced to accept a second class status in the international arena. Meantime, the United States became

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the dominant superpower, and Russia watched as to its dismay the unipolar system increased Washington's influence over all international processes. Russia was unable to reconcile itself to its second class status, and after a short period of uncertainty in its foreign policy began to invest in upgrading its international standing.

Within a decade, the opportunity arose to change the situation. During the first years of his tenure as president, Vladimir Putin changed Russia's foreign policy dramatically in an attempt to have the country regain the status of a major international player. This policy quickly became defiant and assertive, with displays of force and provocations toward the West.¹ This was how the "multipolar" concept unfolded in action, with measures that were supposed to provide Russia with a status equal to that of the United States and to allow it to realize its relative advantages. The path chosen for implementing this concept was a dual approach that combined challenges to the Western system with proactive cooperation with the international community.

This policy earned the support of the public at home, which largely identifies with the "superpower" trend promoted by the leadership. The ideology that has taken hold among the Russian public combines the Russian imperialist tradition with Soviet geopolitical concepts, grounded in an assertive and manipulative approach in international relations such as strong opposition to expanding NATO eastward while bringing the regions of the former Soviet Union into the European Union and NATO, or opposition to democratization pressures. This new foreign policy was implemented during Putin's tenure and has been characterized by the following:

- a. An effort in the international arena to upgrade Russia's status by combining defiance of the United States and NATO – by way of negation of the US-dominating unipolar concept – with proactive cooperation with the overall international system.
- b. On the regional level, which is its preferred arena, Russia has used various levers of influence to push the United States aside and promote its own agenda (for example, agreements on cooperation with BRIC, OIC, and SCO).²
- c. In the space of the former Soviet Union, defined by Russia as an area of vital interest since it is a barrier for ensuring Russia's national security, an uncompromising struggle was waged to repel Western

inroads and attempts to influence countries in the region, and to preserve Russian hegemony. This was done by diplomatic activity (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan), subversion (Ukraine, the Baltic states), and the use of force (Georgia).

In the Russian view, the multipolar system, which undermines the exclusive US status, gives Russia relative advantages.³ The method used to implement this policy – asymmetric of sorts because it was conducted by Russia without real tools (economic, political, or military) – nevertheless achieved noticeable results for Russia and significantly advanced its status in the international arena.

The “Reset” Stage

The new American diplomatic initiative, promoted by President Obama after he took office, created a revolution in Russian foreign policy. The diplomatic initiative, the “reset,” proposed an improved atmosphere between the countries as well as a set of areas for US-Russia cooperation, accompanied by American benefits and concessions. In exchange, Russia would change its policy on issues important to the West, first and foremost Iran. The Russian regime, which had lost more than a little of its self-confidence in the wake of the world economic crisis that caused considerable damage to Russia, saw in the American offer, in addition to its tangible benefits, an opportunity to change Russian policy, which it believed had already maximized its potential. The result of this move was cessation of the diplomatic confrontation with the West and creation of a system of cooperation, along with the establishment of an effective international coalition against a nuclearizing Iran.

The American offer was made as a package deal. As far as is known, Russia was presented with the following proposals:

- a. An American concession on stationing interceptor missiles in Eastern Europe
- b. A positive American response to signing an agreement to reduce strategic weapons (START), in accordance with Russia’s approach
- c. De facto recognition of Russia’s special status in the space of the former Soviet Union, including a concession on not expanding NATO in these areas

- d. Integration of Russia into international activity alongside Western countries (including the Middle East peace process and participation in NATO projects).

In exchange, Russia was invited to join the sanctions regime against Iran, work with the United States and NATO against radical Islamic elements, and provide assistance to NATO activity in Afghanistan. In America's view, the main goal of the reset policy (as presented at that time by Vice President Biden)⁴ was to reduce international tension and eliminate the danger of a military confrontation, preserve the strategic arms control system, and prevent friction between Western countries and Russia against the backdrop of their activities in the former Soviet Union region.

Apparently Russia did not feel that the cost exceeded the benefits, and the reset policy, which was launched in the fall of 2009, has proven quite successful. The bilateral atmosphere has improved, the danger of a military confrontation has been significantly reduced, and the START treaty was signed and ratified (see appendix). A positive dialogue is taking place (as within the framework of the US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission), and cooperation with NATO has proceeded on various levels. Russia is providing logistical assistance for NATO activities in Afghanistan, and is cooperating in the war on terror. Similarly, a decision was made, presented and approved at a NATO conference in Lisbon in November 2010, to launch a joint ballistic missile defense program. The end of the confrontation between NATO and Russia was also formally announced at this conference. In issues relating to the former Soviet Union, it appears that Russia has achieved the desired arrangement, which grants it a special status while keeping the West away from actively advancing its influence in this area. In tandem, Russia has fulfilled its part in the understandings with the United States by joining in the sanctions against Iran.

Despite the relative success of the program, from the Russian point of view there are still gray areas in which its status has not been upgraded, such as participation in the Middle East peace process. It does not appear that over time Russia will concede its interests on this issue. Similarly, it does not appear that Russia has completely abandoned its former global aspirations. With all the advantages and the benefits granted it by the reset program, Russia will likely act to promote its goals in the international system in additional ways.

The New Turning Point

After a period of cooperation in the framework of the reset program, Russia is once again at a crossroads. For some time, a dynamic process has been underway in Russia regarding new solutions to shape the future face of the international system and Russia's proper place within it. Doubts have been raised about the wisdom of Russia's political path, which openly declares an aspiration to achieve the status of a superpower competing alone for its place in the world. Should Russia continue to persist in its activities in glorious international isolation, or has the time arrived to change this concept?

Underlying these deliberations is the understanding that Russia will not successfully meet the growing economic, political, and security challenges on its own, nor will it manage alone to extricate itself from its crises. This is due to its difficult situation (mainly economic) and the widening gap in many areas between it and other global systems, both Western (the US and the EU) and Chinese. Consequently, and as part of the process of examining possible alternatives to the current foreign and defense policy, the model of Russia's partnering with one of the existing international frameworks is under consideration. Any potential new framework would have to be able to help Russia emerge from its difficulties and collaborate with it to design a more convenient (in Russian eyes) international architecture. The following are mentioned as potential candidates:

- a. In the West, the European Union has priority. In addition, a proposal was recently published to establish a new united framework for Russia and Europe as an alternative to both the EU and NATO.
- b. Some are pondering a union with the US in a tripartite Russian-European-American pact, or a bilateral Russian-American pact.
- c. At the very least, closer cooperation with NATO is being examined.
- d. Looking to the Far East, an association with China is under discussion, although other partners are also being examined. Certain elements among the Russian elite believe that the Chinese alternative is preferred. In contrast, there are those who say that China is a competitor and in the future will be a rival of Russia.

It appears that the Russian elite leans in the direction of Europe. In this context, efforts are underway to interest the potential partners, whether by disseminating messages and proposals,⁵ or at high level meetings

(such as Medvedev's meeting with Merkel and Sarkozy in November 2010) and international forums. It is still too early to discuss the practical dimension of the Russian proposals, in light of the rather cool European response.⁶

At the same time, Russia is campaigning to move closer to NATO. The first attempt, made by Medvedev in 2008, was unsuccessful against the background of the war in Georgia. Since the campaign in Georgia in 2008, relations have remained cool, and only with the implementation of the reset program did a thaw occur in relations in this area as well. Russia's renewed attempts during the past year reflect its belief that upgrading relations with NATO will significantly enhance relations with the West as a whole. Therefore, the Russians insist on cooperation, both in the framework of coordination with the NATO-Russia Council, and on the operational level (combating terror, logistical support, and recently, even operational support for NATO forces in Afghanistan). Up to this point, only the deployment of a joint anti-missile array (minor and disappointing from the Russian perspective) was approved, along with continuation and expansion of existing cooperation. In addition, the conflict between Russia and NATO was formally ended, which is likely a sign of things to come.

Implications for the Middle East

The Middle East is seen by the Russian leadership as an area of great geopolitical importance containing a wide range of factors and encompassing global, regional, and Islamic interests. Therefore, the leadership gives priority to the Middle East in its foreign policy and is investing considerable efforts to promote its influential standing in the region by way of competition with its adversaries.

To promote its goals to the fullest, Russia is forced to maneuver between global and regional interests, that is, between the image of a worthy partner for the West that is essential to the international system, and activity on the regional level that is intended to reduce the influence of the West. This latter activity encompasses the principle of cooperative relations with all the regional players in order to gain a clear advantage as an influential actor that balances and mediates between the players because of its ability to engage in dialogue with all parties in the region. Eclipsing the United States and other competing parties is advanced

by encouraging anti-Western trends, a varied aid proposal, including security aid, and development of multidisciplinary cooperation. Among the services offered are bridging and diplomatic mediation.

The new Russo-American cooperation in the framework of the reset program has brought about a refreshing change in Russia's conduct in the Middle East. Within the reset the Middle East is a central place, mainly because of the Iranian issue, and Russia's participation in the sanctions against Iran is a major component of this program. Among the American promises to Russia as a reward for its participation is the issue of upgrading Russia's status in Middle Eastern affairs while integrating it into a more significant role in the diplomatic processes in the region. At least this is Russia's understanding, which with an eye to a future position of influence has proposed various ideas, such as convening a peace conference in Moscow. In any event, Russia has fulfilled its expected role in the agreement and joined the sanctions against Iran. This was accompanied by much hesitation and occurred after Iran itself torpedoed Russia's efforts a number of times to mediate between Tehran and the West.⁷

Is this the final picture, or is this a temporary change in tactics? Here opinion is divided. Russia's interest in its preferred status in Iran has not disappeared, nor has Iran's interest in enjoying Russian support in the future. In practice, however, matters on the Russian-Iranian axis have continued to deteriorate, and even recently a meeting between the Russian and Iranian presidents (a conference on the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan) ended without significant results. For this and other reasons, it appears that at this point there is a crisis in relations and that Russia is seeking an alternative to this shaky axis.

Syria and Lebanon are relevant in this context,⁸ with reports of new procurement deals signed between Russia and these two states. Syria was provided with the Yakhont, an anti-ship cruise missile, in addition to other weapon systems,⁹ although its requests for weapons that upset the balance were rejected, which indicates Russia's measured conduct on

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this sensitive topic. Lebanon also received a Russian gift that includes attack helicopters, tanks, and ammunition.¹⁰ The Lebanese deal, which has no economic rationale, can in fact be explained as the provision of maintenance and training services that ensure a future Russian foothold in the country. The diplomatic side to this rapprochement includes visits by leaders (Medvedev in Syria, Hariri in Russia) along with a series of agreements and understandings. These Russian efforts have not escaped the notice of the United States, which is likewise active in these countries (Lebanon was also offered generous American security assistance).

The Russian rapprochement with these states may indicate a certain turning point in the Russian architecture in the region. This may be an attempt to consolidate an additional diplomatic axis, possibly as an alternative to the weakened Iranian axis. Another possibility is that a Syrian-Lebanese track is being prepared under Russian auspices that will be activated in the peace process with Israel.

Over the past year, there has been a significant warming of relations with Israel as well. Is this merely the logical continuation of a long process of building bilateral relations, or can we expect the acceleration of Russian cooperation in support of Russia's diplomatic goals? Can this be connected to developments in the Lebanese-Syrian sector? Is Russia constructing a new formula of its own to promote the regional peace process? While all developments have been influenced by the reset program, is there a hint in the recent events of a transition from the reset program to a different concept? Answers to these and other questions will emerge with further developments in Russia's foreign policy.

Conclusion

Certain changes are emerging in Russia's Middle East policy, possibly as a consequence of the changes taking place in Russian foreign policy in general. The new trend is unfolding in the wake of Russia's response to the reset program and its participation in the sanctions regime against Iran. First and foremost, these changes have to do with Russo-Iranian relations, which have cooled significantly. This has implications for the previously positive interface between Russia and the "axis of evil," whose future is now unclear. As a result, Russia finds itself seeking quick alternatives, with a separate "axis" with Syria and Lebanon emerging as the preferred option. If so, it can serve a number of possible goals in the

region. For example, it can demonstrate to Iran that it is not indispensable and there is an available alternative, and that it would do well not to move too far away from Russia despite insults suffered. Otherwise, Russia will make do with a new option. Or, the new axis can allow Russia to jumpstart a Syrian-Lebanese track in the peace process with Israel, which might enable Russia's involvement, although it has not been included in the Palestinian track up till now.

While Russia has taken a rather active part in the peace process in the Quartet and in other international forums, it does not in fact play a real role in the peace process itself. It was absent from the Washington Conference, it is not taking part in the discussion with the parties in the Middle East, and it has not sponsored a peace conference in Moscow, as it intended. It appears that the United States is conducting the process in the Middle East alone, and it will likely not be prepared to share this status with other partners.

There has recently been a new flowering in bilateral relations with Israel, with Russia expressing interest in extensive cooperation (with an emphasis on technology). International trade is growing and tourists from Russia are flooding Israel. Russian signals present Israel as a desirable partner in the international arena, and Russia has adhered to its commitment to a peace process and to Israel's security. At the same time, there is no lack of dispute between the two countries. Likewise, Russia is careful to adopt a "balanced" approach towards the other interested parties in the region, while demonstrating its abilities to maintain positive relationships with all the parties.

The current Russian rapprochement with Israel, which includes increased cooperation, is likely intended, *inter alia*, to facilitate Russia's future integration into the peace process with the help of the Israeli "entry ticket." It is possible that America's difficulties in promoting the process in accordance with US considerations boost Russia's interest to test its strength on this court, where it has previously not succeeded in making inroads. Russia is therefore working to cast itself as an effective mediator acceptable to all parties in the region. And overall, signs that Russia is distancing itself from the reset policy and turning to a new policy can be seen in current Russian conduct

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in the Middle East. In this context, the positive independent capabilities that Russia is trying to demonstrate are liable to help it gain entry to the prestigious EU and NATO clubs.

Thus Russian foreign policy in recent years reveals a mixture of dynamic processes, combining efforts to shape an assertive foreign policy to upgrade Russia's international standing with a cautious, constructive policy that works to integrate Russia in a positive manner in the international system. These concomitant trends suggest that Russia has no real intention of making concessions in its far reaching aspirations in the international arena. Perhaps this is the adaptation of the multipolar concept to changing circumstances and its latent integration into veteran international frameworks, such as the reset policy or the new proposal for a union with Europe or NATO. Time will tell whether changes can actually be expected in the familiar Russian trends.

Notes

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- 1 See, for example, Putin's speech in Munich in 2007, <http://www.securityconference.de/Putin-s-speech.381.0.html?&L=1>.
- 2 Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC); Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).
- 3 See *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>.
- 4 See Joe Biden's speech in Munich in 2009, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2009/02/07/8375>.
- 5 Irina Filatova, "Putin Seeks Free Trade with EU," *Moscow Times*, November 26, 2010, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/putin-seeks-free-trade-with-eu/424854.html>.
- 6 David Gordon Smith, "The World from Berlin: Putin's Free-Trade Proposal Is 'Just a Smokescreen,'" *Spiegel Online*, November 26, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,731370,00.html>.
- 7 Samir Shakhbaz, "Interview with Alexei Fenenko: Russia and America are Doomed to Remain Political Enemies," *Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalization*, October 12, 2010, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=21416>.
- 8 Syria is the most conspicuous Russian partner alongside Iran. Russia has a long common history with Syria from its Soviet Union days, which, after a period of cooling off, has flourished once again over the past decade. In exchange for writing off old debts and diverse new cooperative ventures, Syria also granted Russia a new foothold in its ports, Tartus and Latakia. In

recent years, Syria has become a key regional player for Russia, which, with the changes taking place in the Iranian sector, is becoming more important.

- 9 For details, see Reuters, "Report: Russia Signs Arms Deal with Syria," *Haaretz*, May 14, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/report-russia-signs-arms-deal-with-syria-1.290409>.
- 10 "Russia Gifts Lebanon," November 25, 2010, <http://www.strategypage.com/htm/htproc/articles/20101125.aspx>.

Appendix: New START

In April 2010 the American and Russian presidents signed the new START nuclear disarmament treaty, another in the series of agreements between the countries for the control and disarming of strategic nuclear weapons, some of which have entered into force and some of which have not, beginning with the SALT agreement in 1969. According to the new understandings, the number of warheads deployed will be limited to 1,550 for each side. The number of launch platforms will be limited to 800, and of these, only 700 can be deployed.¹

Although ratified by the US Senate in December 2010, the agreement was deemed problematic by much of the public. First, the agreement refers only to the limitation on deployed warheads. Therefore, in light of the limitation achieved in the SORT agreement, which limits the general number of warheads to 2,200, each of the sides can have another 650 non-deployed warheads. Second, in counting the warheads, the bombers are counted as one warhead. This makes it possible to place the non-deployed warheads on the bombers as well, and thus in practice to increase the number of deployed warheads. Furthermore, it is also possible to increase the number of warheads beyond 2,200 if Russia upgrades its planes and takes advantage of the legal lacunae in the agreement.² Third, there is no limitation in the agreement on tactical warheads. This fact gives Russia an advantage because it has many more tactical warheads than the United States. Fourth, Russia has 809 warhead carriers (566 of them deployed), and the US has 1,188 warhead-carrying missiles (798 of them deployed).³ Therefore, limiting the number of warhead-carrying missiles benefits Russia more than the United States. Finally, Russia has declared that if the US develops an anti-missile missile system, it will withdraw from the agreement if it sees this development as dangerous.

Agreement	Warheads	Number of warhead-carrying missiles	Expiration date
START 1 (in effect since 1994)	6,000	1,600	December 5, 2009
SORT (in effect since 2003)	2,200	No limitation	December 31, 2009 or with the signing of a new agreement
New START	1,550/2,200	700/800	

Notes

- 1 *Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms*, www.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf.
- 2 S. Bank, "Beyond the Reset Policy: Current Dilemmas of U.S.-Russia Relations," *Comparative Strategy* 29, no. 4 (2010): 339.
- 3 NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace, and Security, "US and Russia Conclude New START Treaty," http://disarm.igc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=337:us-and-russia-conclude-nuclear-arms-control-treaty-after-nearly-a-year-of-negotiations-new-start-treaty-makes-modest-cuts-to-arsenals&catid=145:disarmament-times-spring-2010&Itemid=2.